

# Setting students' professional agenda in the classroom



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**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of the study was to gauge the flow of information from university lecturers to students. The fundamental hypothetical basis used for the study was that of agenda-setting theory – the idea that the mass media have a strong influence on the public agenda. The role of the university lecturer as a source of information and the influence of that information upon students and their agenda was the object of the study. The empirical study featured a panel of 248 Spanish university students and the results highlight the importance of the role of the university lecturer in channelling information to students even though findings demonstrate that the issues which are important for students (their agenda) may be less relevant for lecturers.

**KEYWORDS:** communication, agenda-setting, university, education and lecturer



## INTRODUCTION

The mass media are not the only channels individuals employ in the communicative process to be informed about current issues or the subjects of greatest concern to the individual. There are other paths, which equally orient and facilitate this task. Although this investigation is grounded in a theory of mass communication, the *agenda-setting* theory, its purpose is to measure salience in another process of human communication.

The principal idea of this theory is that there frequently is a transfer of relevance from one agenda to another (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Specifically, the agenda of subjects prioritized by the mass media are those which influence the audience or public agenda and not *vice versa*. The largest number of previous studies has focused on the *mass media* and the audience; however, this study has broadened the field to a new setting, the area of higher education. There exist in society today many and diverse agendas. This study presents one of them, the agenda of university journalism students and the influence the professor exercises as a communication medium.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Agenda-setting theory uses a metaphor to state that issues of general interest that appear in the media agenda are passed on to form part of the public agenda with similar degrees of salience. People not only receive information about the outside world through the media, they also learn what emphasis they should give to particular information. In most cases involving public affairs, the mass media are the only source of information that individuals use to orient themselves and access information, but at the risk of interpreting images in a manner that is distinct from reality (Lippmann, 1922).

The first studies were based on a concept developed by Cohen (1963), which states that the media does not have much success in telling people what to think, but it does in telling them what to think about.

The initial research of McCombs and Shaw (1972) in North Carolina focused on the relationship between the agenda of public issues in selected media sources and undecided voters in Chapel Hill during the U.S. presidential election of 1968. To determine the agenda of their audience the researchers conducted a survey asking citizens what the most important problems (MIP) facing the country were as they saw them. In order to establish the media agenda they analyzed the news coverage of public issues in newspapers, magazines and television news broadcasts used by Chapel Hill voters to follow the election. The results confirmed that the issues emphasized by the media corresponded to a high degree with the voters' agenda of issues.

Many later studies have supported the results found in Chapel Hill and confirmed the theory's assertions (Funkhouser, 1973; Weaver, 1977; Eyal, Winter & De-george, 1981; Mackuen, 1981; Rogers & Dearing, 1988; Zhu, 1992; McCombs & Zhu, 1995).

In addition to this first phase, *agenda-setting* has passed to second phase or level of mass media analysis. This aspect reveals that the salience of nuances and attributes of topics discussed by the media also influence individual tendencies and attitudes, which is to say, guides the audience to think in a particular direction (McCombs & Evatt, 1995). This second level is linked with the different frameworks, focuses and evaluations that the mass media generate as inducers of opinion. In other words, the mass media participate in the area of interpretive frameworks of present societies (Goffman, 1974) developing a role that is emphasized by the enunciation and orientation of the topic they cover (Entman, 1993). In this vein there exist numerous and varied studies centered on the function of agenda-setting of the attributes from several multidimensional perspectives. Ghanem (1997b) verified that the attributes the media gave to the topic of crime in Texas correlated positively with the level of importance the public agenda picked up from them; Iyengar & Simon (1993) differentiated both levels of coverage of the Gulf War, on one side they studied the first level of the agenda with the work of correspondents informing

about the most important problem facing the country at the same time as they differentiated the articles that mentioned and oriented about the possible paths to conflict resolution. Of course, it must also be noted that this transfer of salience process is conditioned by other factors, among them the degree of need for information and orientation (Weaver, 1977), the obtrusive or unobtrusive nature of the topic for the audience agenda, time of exposure, geographic proximity and credibility of the source (Winter, 1981). Also important are other factors or independent variables linked to the placement of the news in the media and the type of affective attributes they contain (Ghanem, 1997a).

Many of the empirical studies are linked to the analysis of electoral issues or to the parameters of political communication, principally in the United States. Despite this, as noted by McCombs (2004, p. xii), there have also been studies that yielded significant results in countries such as England, Spain, Japan and Taiwan among others, which demonstrate a close relation between mass media and society.

This paper details a study that departs from several hypotheses based on the foundation of *agenda-setting* theory to analyze how this process works in relation to the salience of academic subjects and common interests between professors and students. The students, in the same way as the mass communication audience, need the professors' orientation – the *media* message – to learn the most important subjects from their courses or educational programs and what importance to give each.

H1: Extrapolating the idea of relevance established by *agenda-setting* to the communicative relation in higher education, the professor will be one of the main independent variables in the formative process and *agenda-setter*, in the expectations of material conveyed, influencing which topics students, in the professional environment, consider most important in their courses (students' agenda) and the degree of importance given to each of them.

H2: The professor's involvement in the communicative process during the length of a semester modifies the value students have for the professional topics they consider most relevant in their agenda.

## METHOD

The data are taken from a panel study conducted with students from the Faculty of Communication Studies of the Complutense University at Madrid during the second semester of the academic year. In February, 227 students in the first year and 151 in the last year, a total of 378 people, were given the first questionnaire. The sample size was designed to cope with the problem of possible attrition in the second phase. As expected, at the conclusion of the semester in May, 248 students from the initial sample responded to the questionnaire, 149 in the first year and 99 in the last year.

The design of the study involved three distinct periods. The first was an open pretest given to 200 students. This included two open-ended questions, which asked their opinion about the most important topics and aspects of a specific journalism course. This question represents an adaptation to the world of education from the traditional most important problem (MIP) question employed by Gallup and many agenda-setting studies to measure which topics are of most concern among the public (Smith, 1980; McCombs & Zhu, 1995). The answers to the pretest questionnaire identified the students' thematic agenda of the best and worst aspects of their courses. The answers were used to design a questionnaire composed of 36 closed-end questions that were used later in the two phases of the panel study. The second and third periods consisted of the panel study, the beginning of the semester (February) and the end of the semester (May).

The students that participated in the January pretest were in their first, second, third and fourth year of Journalism, Audiovisual Communication, and Advertising and Public Relations, and were finishing their first semester of the academic year. This meant that they had been in contact with the course and the professor long enough to respond meaningfully about the issues they considered the best and worst of what they were learning.

The main topics that dominated the professional agenda of students were the product of the open-ended question: *What is the best aspect of the course?* They were: easy, pleasant, the professor, practical, relation to degree, learning new things, participation, up to date and useful. In the opposite direction, there was the agenda of topics that worried students. To the question, *What is the worst part of the course?*, the responses most noted were: a lot of material, lack of time, only one semester, not the full academic year, not practical, overcrowding, very theoretical, unrelated to degree, the professor and overlap with other materials.

These two sets of responses made it possible to understand from the students' perspective the key topics of their agenda. All of these topics were present in the 36 closed-end questions of the panel study whose objective was to observe how the respondents valued those topics (the second level of *agenda-setting*) and how their answers evolved over the semester. The intervention of the professor was considered one of the main sources of potential change.

This does not suggest the professor is the only factor influencing the value students express for their studies. There exist other factors, which also influence this communicative process. Some of them are connected to the personal interest of the student, the knowledge he/she has acquired from the course, the frequency with which they attend class, the eloquence of the professor, and the professor's style, among others.

In order for this investigation to follow through with the objectives it set out to accomplish, the panel sample had to meet a series of requirements. The respondents had to be registered for a degree in journalism, begin new classes in the second

semester and it had to be their first course with the professor. These requirements assumed there would be no interference or predetermined stereotypes with the course or professors, that is, the level of familiarity would be the minimum possible. This way the course is introduced as something new.

In May, two questions were added to the February questionnaire of 36 questions with the purpose of giving additional validity to the panel data about the influence of the professor. These questions asked about the frequency of class attendance and the amount of the course bibliography read outside the class. The survey found that 82.8% of the respondents attended class every day or almost every day. Regarding the added question to find out how many books they had read which might interfere with the perception of the course given by the professor, the data reflect that 66.1% had read only one book or none.

The questionnaire was filled out inside the classroom, moments after class ended. The final sample is composed of 60% of first year students and 40% of fourth year students, the first year courses are 3 and fourth year are 4, equaling a total of 7 different professors involved in the process. The mean age was 19.6 years, 26.6% were men and 73.4% women, and only 9.9% worked more than 4 hours daily.

The panel initially measured students' expectations of the most relevant aspects of their courses before they are influenced by the professor. This way it can be learned what aspects the professor, as an independent variable and communicative medium – supposedly a facilitator of the learning process – contributes to the modification of this initial agenda.

## RESULTS

Table 1 shows the transfer of salience for the aspects that students considered the *best* of the course on the open pretest. In the students' agenda relative to the *best* of the course it can be seen how the ranking of most valued subjects students emphasized: *related to degree*, *up to date*, *the professor* and *easy*. In both instances the values with the highest percentages occupied similar places in the ranking. At first glance of the panel *related to degree*, the value of most noted with a 40.8% remained in the same position in May, with a decrease of 7.9%. Similarly, *up to date* occupied second place in February (20.4%) as it did in May (21.7%), *easy* the third and fourth place in February (13.2%) and third place in May (15.8%), the same as *professor* with a 13.2% and placed fourth in May (11.2%). Only the following values varied in the ranking: *pleasant* moved from fifth place in February (6.6%) to sixth in May (5.9%), *participation* from sixth (3.9%) to seventh (4.6%) and *practical* from seventh (2%) to fifth (7.9%). The correlation between the most valued *items* such as the best in February, and the most valued in May, was +.884 ( $p < .05$ ).

Table 1. What do you think about the most valued topics/aspects of the course?<sup>1</sup> (In February and May)

	February	%	May	%
Related to degree	1	40.8	1	32.9
Easy	3.5	13.2	3	15.8
Practical	7	2.0	5	7.9
Professor	3.5	13.2	4	11.2
Up to date	2	20.4	2	21.7
Pleasant/Enjoyable	5	6.6	6	5.9
Participation	6	3.9	7	4.6

Source: author's elaboration.

Comparing the specific responses in February and May, some changes appeared in the percentage of each category, although this did not affect the rankings very much. At the end of the semester, after the professor's intervention, *related to degree* continued being the aspect most emphasized, but with a decrease of 7.7%, *up to date* increased 1.3%, as did *easy* 2.6%, and the *professor* decreased 2%.

Table 2 shows the aspects considered the worst on the students' agenda and their change of priorities between February and May. *Very theoretical* (32.4%), *a lot of material* (26.5%), *lack of time* (17.2%) and *overcrowding* (11.3%) were the subjects least valued. The immediate presence of exams and pressure at the end of the semester probably influenced the second questionnaire since the percentages changed considerably. However, there is little change in the students' overall priorities.

Table 2. What do you think about the least valued topics/aspects of the course?<sup>2</sup> (In February and May)

	February	%	May	%
A lot of material	2	26.5	1	40.2
Lack of time	3	17.2	3	14.7
Very theoretical	1	32.4	2	25.0
Few internships	6	4.9	6	2.9
Overcrowding	4	11.3	5	4.4
Professor	5	5.9	4	11.3
Difficult to pass	7	2.0	7	1.3

Source: author's elaboration.

<sup>1</sup> Spearman's rho = .884,  $p < .05$ .

<sup>2</sup> Spearman's rho = .929,  $p < .01$ .

From the questionnaire in May, the subject *a lot of material* moved to first in the ranking with an increase of 13.7%. *Very theoretical* dropped to second in the agenda with a decrease of 7.4%, *lack of time* remained in third with a slight decrease of 3.5% and *the professor* moved to fourth with an increase of 5.4%. The correlation between the aspects emphasized as the worst in February and May was  $+0.929$  ( $p < .01$ ).

When students were asked to respond directly to each of the aspects they considered the *best* and *worst* of their courses, interesting results were seen. Table 3 shows that in February (from the right-hand column) 36% of interviewees answered *a lot* or *a fair amount* whereas 64% answered *somewhat* or *none*. In May, of the same group, 28.3% answered *a lot* or *a fair amount* whereas 71.7% answered *somewhat* or *none*. The cross data (read diagonally) shows that, of the 36% who answered *a lot* or *a fair amount* in February, 60.7% held the same opinion in May with the remaining 39.3% changing their response. Similarly, of the 64% who answered *somewhat* or *none* in February, 10.1% changed their response to *a lot* or *a fair amount* in May whereas 89.9% maintained their opinion. (The remaining tables should be read in the same way.)

Table 3. Do you think this course is relevant to your university studies?<sup>3</sup> (In February and May)

February	May		
	A lot and a fair amount	Somewhat and none	%
A lot and a fair amount	60.7%	39.3%	36%
Somewhat and none	10.1%	89.9%	64%
%	28.3%	71.7%	$n = 247$

Source: author's elaboration.

Table 4 centers on university students' perception when asked for the relation between their future profession and the manner by which the professor taught the course. The majority (53.3%) believed the professor could relate *some* with the profession, an expectation that was confirmed in May (50%), but with a negative tendency since 27.5% changed their initial opinion to *none*. The responses from the second panel reflected similar percentages to those from February, despite a medium mobility in 35% of the cases.

At university, as in any other educational system, one of the assumed principals is that the students want to learn what they have decided to study. In fact, in the responses to the open pretest this was one of the values mentioned as the *best* of a course.

<sup>3</sup> Chi square = 71.626, 1 df,  $p < .001$ .

Table 4. How much does this course relate to your future profession?<sup>4</sup> (In February and May)

February	May			
	A lot and a fair amount	Somewhat	None	%
A lot and a fair amount	69.8%	24.5%	5.7%	22.1%
Somewhat	11.7%	65.6%	22.7%	53.3%
None	3.4%	39%	57.6%	24.6%
%	22.5%	50%	27.5%	n = 240

Source: author’s elaboration.

Table 5 results confirm that at the beginning of the semester the majority of students (51.2%) believed it was *a lot or a fair amount* important for them to learn from the discipline. Despite this only 38.6% of this majority continued believing the same the second time surveyed. In May, the majority (61.4%) opined the opposite. Some (38.9%) of the February majority changed their opinion to form part of a majority that at the end of the semester only cared to learn *somewhat or none*. Although these data demonstrate that a large portion of the people responded the same at the end as they did at the beginning, in the cases where a change occurred, it was for the worst.

Table 5. How important is it for you to learn about this course?<sup>5</sup> (In February and May)

February	May		
	A lot and a fair amount	Somewhat and none	%
A lot and a fair amount	61.1%	38.9%	51.2%
Somewhat and none	15%	85%	48.8%
%	38.6%	61.4%	n = 246

Source: author’s elaboration.

Similar results appear in Table 6, which reports how much students believed the course was going to contribute to their professional development once the semester had finished. At the beginning of the semester the students had a significantly negative view with 71.1% believing that the course would contribute only *somewhat or none*. The response remained nearly the same in May, increasing to 78%. Almost half (47.1%) of respondents who answered *a lot and a fair amount* in February answered *somewhat or none* in May.

<sup>4</sup> Chi square = 113.232, 4 df,  $p < .001$ .

<sup>5</sup> Chi square = 55.191, 1 df,  $p < .001$ .



Table 6. How much will this course contribute to your future profession?<sup>6</sup> (In February and May)

February	May		
	A lot and a fair amount	Somewhat and none	%
A lot and a fair amount	52.9%	47.1%	28.6%
Somewhat and none	9.7%	90.3%	71.4%
%	22%	78%	<i>n</i> = 245

Source: author's elaboration.

Another aspect of analysis in this study is the professor. Despite the negative tendency of all the responses, it is interesting to see the importance students gave to the intervention of professors as content guides, that is to say, professors are a desired channel of communication between knowledge and the students. It can be seen in Table 7 that a large majority in February (72.1%) as in May (60.2%) believed they had a *very* important role. Positive changes can also be seen in the other categories.

The highest percentage of responses remained on the diagonal in all cases, meaning that the greatest number of responses stayed the same at both points in time. As for the categories that saw a decrease on the diagonal, the loss was added to a category of better value. For example, the 43.1% of students who responded *a fair amount* of importance to the professor in February, continued to do so in May, 33.3% changed their response to *a lot* opposed to 23.5% who responded *somewhat* or *none*.

Table 7. Is the professor's role important for you?<sup>7</sup> (In February and May)

February	May			
	A lot	A fair amount	Somewhat and none	%
A lot	70.5%	22.2%	7.4%	72.1%
A fair amount	33.3%	43.1%	23.5%	20.9%
Somewhat and none	35.3%	23.5%	41.2%	7%
%	60.2%	26.6%	13.1%	<i>n</i> = 244

Source: author's elaboration.

<sup>6</sup> Chi square = 54.162, 1 df, *p* < .001.

<sup>7</sup> Chi square = 36.360, 4 df, *p* < .001 (some cells do not have five cases).

Although Table 7 shows the importance students give to their professors, another question measured whether the professor could be eliminated or replaced by another medium that would serve as facilitator of knowledge. In Table 8, which shows the responses to this question, a similar result is seen, although with a predominance in the *somewhat* or *none* category at the beginning (35.1%) and a greater increase from first to last (45.3%). Despite this, more than half of the students said at both points of the semester that the professor was *a lot* or *a fair amount* indispensable.

This parallelism between media and professors is focused on the transmission of information. The results confirm that the professor has a central role in this communication process and the respondents perceive him as important or indispensable. As Wanta (1989) shows, when a message or any kind of information gets direct coverage on media with no editing or supervision by a gatekeeper, people give more value to the person who transfers the message.

Table 8. How indispensable to your learning process do you consider the professor?<sup>8</sup> (In February and May)

February	May			
	A lot	A fair amount	Somewhat and none	%
A lot	39.7%	37.2%	23.1%	31.8%
A fair amount	18.5%	46.9%	34.6%	33.1%
Somewhat and none	8.1%	16.3%	75.6%	35.1%
%	21.6%	33.1%	45.3%	<i>n</i> = 245

Source: author's elaboration.

## DISCUSSION

The central idea of the transferred relevance of items from the media agenda to the public agenda was extrapolated from the *agenda-setting* theory framework and applied to the field of university education. This study has analyzed the agenda of the most important aspects of journalism courses according to the priority given them by students and the influence that the professor's intervention had on the perception of those subjects (second level of *agenda-setting*).

With respect to H1, which focused on the most emphasized subjects of the professional aspect of courses and the degree of priority students gave each of them, the answers reflected a high correlation between their expectations at the beginning of the course and what they responded at the end. A key result for the investigation is

<sup>8</sup> Chi square = 59.823, df 4, *p* < 001.

how the professor figured into both agendas. That is, at both times the professor occupied one of the four places most emphasized in the *ranking for best* or the *worst* of the course.

H2 sought to measure if the professor's intervention over the course of the semester affected the students' agenda. It must be noted that, as in any communicative process, the medium is not the only independent variable; there exist others that also intervene in the process of salience transfer.

The time factor of the panel was not only affected by the incorporation of the professor, response maturation factors were also involved. According to Campbell & Stanley (1978, p. 21), these maturation factors take into account all biological and psychological processes that vary systematically with the passage of time and independently of specific external events. Therefore, this design does not presume to consider the professors as unique independent variables in the change of student responses, though there are indications to confirm that their action represents an important role. At the beginning of the semester, the students were not familiar with the material, and the data from May reflected that 66.1% of them had consulted only one book or none of those recommended in the bibliography of material. In this sense, the professor represents the main point of reference employed by their public to know or "learn" from the coursework.

The greatest portion of the results shown in the tables reflected a negative inertia in the responses given by the students. The analysis reflected a tendency that the majority of students were inclined, in February as well as in May, to respond in terms of the categories of lesser importance. A high percentage remained unchanged and when they changed opinion it usually was for the worse. This perception could demonstrate apathy or laziness on the part of students since what they believed was most important according to their expectations was not reflected in the same way with what the professor taught them during the semester. Despite this disconnect of agendas, the majority responded that the professor was fundamental and indispensable in the communicative process of learning even when his participation worsened the results.

Perhaps this positive finding is related to the idea that media, be what they may, fulfill the simplifier and guide function for subjects we do not directly access. Therefore, their function as facilitator is indispensable.

This investigation is not the first to use a different focus of *agenda-setting* theory outside the strict framework of mass media analysis (Gandy, 1982; Manheim, 1994; Rogers, Dearing & Chang, 1991; Watts, 1993). And yet, the study presented in this article is a pioneer in its area because it is the first time that an investigation of *agenda-setting* has moved distinctly beyond studies in mass communication.

This research used the process described by *agenda-setting* theory, extrapolating it to the world of sociology of education and communication. It is a study of communicative behavior in the field of education. The interest of this application resides in the utility of analyzing the process established by this theory to other areas where

the important topics are unknown or little known to their audience. And in those where the medium is indispensable as facilitator of the message. That is to say, it is the study of salience from one agenda to another.

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